

# Iti Fabvssa



**Nvnih Waiya Mound, located in Winston County, Miss., is the ending destination of the Choctaw migration stories and the Tribe's most sacred site.**

## Details on the Choctaw migration

### *Question:*

I read in the inaugural Iti Fabvssa that a prophet told the Choctaw they had been directed to move east until the iti fabvssa [pole] stood perpendicular, thus indicating the end of their migration. What the article did not say is where the migration started, nor the name of the prophet. Can you please tell me these two names?

Blessings, Bill

### *Answer:*

Dear Bill,

Many Choctaw stories explain the beginning of the Tribe in terms of a vast migration of Choctaw people into our Mississippi Homeland at a distant time in the past. To the best of our knowledge, none of the Choctaw oral traditions that are told today or that survive in written form give the precise starting point for this Choctaw migration or the personal name of the prophet whose pole indicated the direction that the journey should take.

Some information relevant to your questions may possibly be included in an account of the Choctaw migration that was written by Dr. Gideon Lincecum in 1861. Lincecum claimed to have received the story from the mouth of a Choctaw alikchi named Chahta Immataha, back in the 1820s. Unfortunately, this manuscript has some issues. Lincecum clearly embellished the account beyond factuality, but his writing also makes it obvious that he was familiar with traditional Choctaw culture. Because of this, it is often impossible to tell which parts of the story Lincecum made up himself and which

parts of the story could possibly reflect reality. Keeping this in mind, according to Lincecum the Choctaw migration apparently began somewhere west of the Rocky Mountains and lasted for 43 years. His account does not mention the prophet by name, but refers to him simply as Isht Ahullo. Today, this title has a bad connotation for many Choctaw speakers, but in the past it simply meant something like “miracle worker” (see Byington 1915:202).

Many other, much less detailed, accounts of the Choctaw migration exist. These stories were being told at the time when Europeans first began taking notice of them (e.g. Du Pratz 2006:326 [ca. 1720]) and are still told in Choctaw communities today. Like Lincecum's account, they describe a long journey made by a large group of Choctaw people that ended at the present site of Nvnih Waiya. Renditions of these stories sometimes differ in such details as, which tribe(s) made the journey with the Choctaw, whether a prophet or Chahta himself carried the pole, and the color of the pole. Most, but not all of them describe the starting point as an unspecified location far to the west of the present state of Mississippi.

Interestingly, the Choctaw term for “west,” hvshi aiokatula, means literally the “place where the sun falls in the water.” Some believe that this term may be evidence that the Choctaw people began the migration at the Pacific Ocean, where they would have observed the sun “falling into the water” every evening. While this could be a possible explanation, it is a certainty that for centuries in Mississippi, the Choctaw watched the sun set over the Mississippi River to the west. Today, there are many ideas about where the migration

mentioned in the stories could have begun, but with the currently available evidence, it seems unlikely that definitive proof for a specific location will be forthcoming.

As we briefly referred to in the inaugural (August 2009) edition of this column, a second major group of Choctaw origins stories exists. According to these, rather than journeying from the west, the Choctaw people came out of the ground from a cave that is located near Nvnih Waiya, in what is now Winston County, Mississippi. Like the migration accounts, these earth-emergence stories were told when Europeans first began writing about Choctaw people (e.g. Romans 1999:169 [1775]) and they are still told in Choctaw communities today.

Skeptical outside observers often have difficulty accepting any historical truth in Choctaw oral accounts about our own history because they perceive that our migration and earth-emergence stories contradict each other. After all, one story seems to clearly indicate that the Choctaw people originated in the Homeland of Mississippi, while the other suggests just as strongly that Choctaw people began some place far to the west and had to migrate to find the Homeland. Yet, to many Choctaw people: "Interpreted symbolically, spiritually, socially, pragmatically, and affectively, the stories are not contradictions at all" (Mould 2004:62).

Because they are transmitted by the spoken word, Choctaw oral histories have a different nature than written texts. This does not mean that they are inaccurate; to the contrary, some Native American oral histories have been shown to document events that happened thousands of years ago (Deloria 1995:195-197). At least some Choctaw communities systematically passed on their history to up-coming generations, through regular daily instruction from Tribal elders and storytellers. Such repetition could ensure that the details of oral histories were accurately memorized. However, this traditional system of education had already fallen out of practice by the early 1800s (Hodgson 1823:278-279). An untold amount of Choctaw historical and cultural knowledge was a result.

Even the oldest detailed Choctaw oral histories were recorded a generation after the discontinuation of the formal, traditional education. This may explain some of the differences in the details of the specific renditions of Choctaw origins stories told by different people. However, this would not explain why Choctaw people have told both the migration and earth emergence stories for hundreds of years.

As noted by Roger Echo-Hawk (2000:274), oral histories, because they are continually dependant on memory, tend to compress information. In extreme cases, the effect can be similar to what would happen if American history were condensed into a single

page of text; the most major details are retained, but their context is lost.

When examined uncritically, Choctaw oral accounts appear to depict the history of an unchanging group through time ("THE CHOCTAW TRIBE"), when actually they represent a collection of snapshots of the complex history of our dynamic ancestors who lived in many different communities that changed and developed over time.

We posit that the two different Choctaw origins accounts may describe the different histories of some of the separate groups of people that have come together through the millennia to create the Choctaw communities of today. Now, rather than being something that separates, these ancestral origins stories serve as a unifying connection between all Choctaw people.

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